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Twenty Characteristics of an Effective Conflict Management Response Team

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Abstract

In a recent study of educational settings nation-wide, in a period of one year, 65 percent of public schools recorded that one or more violent incidents had taken place, amounting to an estimated 757,000 incidents. This figure translates to a rate of approximately 15 crimes per 1,000 students enrolled (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). These may be in the form of verbal abuse, bullying, extortions, and fights. Although there are a wide range of explanations for such incidents that might be attributed to the psychological-emotional issues that students bring to educational settings, one contributing factor is that of teachers' and school personnel's limited to no preparation in optimal levels of conflict resolution skill development. This article presents twenty characteristics that may be used to resolve conflicts prior to the occurrence of such incidents. These characteristics provide direction to peaceful solution to a disagreement between two or more parties. The list, gleaned from the body of literature addressing conflict resolution, is based on the premise that the best solution to a conflict is the solution that is best for all individuals involved, but also acknowledges that this is not always possible. Recommendations that will lead to the best possible outcome are provided.

Twenty Characteristics of an Effective Conflict Management Response Team

Introduction

What is conflict?

Conflict is a disagreement or an argument. The Cambridge English dictionary defines conflict as an active disagreement between people with opposing opinions or principles. Conflicts of different types and forms often occur in learning environments. Research has found that during early adolescence, students begin to think more abstractly, question the rules and regulations that are set for them by adults, and often wish to have more autonomy in making decisions (Eccles, Lord, & Buchanan, 1996; Priyanka, 2012). Dodge, Coie, & Lyman (2006) and LaRusso & Selman (2011) observed that this period of wanting more autonomy is often marked by changes and related increased tension in interpersonal relationships with peers, parents, and authority. Conflicts in educational settings may take the forms of verbal abuse, bullying, extortions, and physical fights. Brinson, Kottler, & Fisher (2004) attribute this state of affairs to the lack of conflict resolution skills among school personnel and the absence of such in training programs. A report by Heaviside, Rowland and Williams (1998) revealed that about 57% of public elementary and secondary schools reported at least one incidence of violence between 1996 and 1997. The National Center for Education Statistics (2016) reported that during the 2013–14 school year, 65% of public elementary and secondary schools recorded that one or more violent incidents had taken place, amounting to an estimated 757,000 incidents. This figure translates to a rate of approximately 15 crimes per 1,000 students enrolled in 2013–14.

Lam & Chin (2004) identified the common causes of conflicts among the youth as family breakdown, drug abuse, economic issues (e.g., poor housing) and poor education. Some students

also resort to violence because they lack knowledge of skills to resolve conflicts. Such students may carry weapons to school to defend themselves because they fear for their safety.

Considering the seriousness of the matter, it becomes extremely important for educational institutions and settings to make it a priority to have systems in place to resolve conflicts.

Brinson, et al., (2004) refer to conflict resolution as “the process of communication between two or more groups that are in dispute through the help of a mediator”. The mediator in this case has the primary objective of helping the two opposing sides to refrain from blaming one another, and instead focus on understanding the cause of the problem and finding a common ground to agree. Mediators’ role should be to help the two sides of the conflict better understand each other’s positions and to develop respect for one another’s points of view.

Addressing Conflicts in Learning Environments

Skiba and Peterson (1999) recommended conflict resolution as a programmatic prevention effort that can be used in addressing violence in schools. They observed that conflict resolution teaches students to consider and use non-violent strategies in solving conflicts. Middle schools can provide supportive climate for adolescents to establish healthy relationships and manage common relationship conflicts. However, problems such as ostracism, gossip, romantic disputes, and bullying are common, but it may be difficult for teachers to build skills to resolve such conflicts because the traditional governance structure and the ethos of schools may be a hindrance.

Whether one is teaching in a K-12 school, a preschool, or a college classroom, one of the greatest skills a teacher can model and teach his/her students is how to resolve conflicts. People often avoid conflicts in part because the mere mention of conflict denotes the presence of disagreement often resulting in someone being the winner and someone else the loser of the

presenting argument. According to Saha (2012), conflict resolution in schools has traditionally been governed by discipline and student welfare policies that deal with the conflict in a Quasi-Judicial manner, assuming that procedural fairness is embedded within the system. Saha went on to assert that traditional discipline used in schools may encourage power imbalance and unilateral decision-making about the appropriate kind of punishments and ways to address human errors. Shanklin, Brene, McManus, Kinchen, and Kann (2007) observed that some faculty may prefer not to get involved in student conflict, especially when such students become violent. This does not have to be the case, especially if one has the problem-solving tools to help individuals work out their disagreements in a positive manner. If children and adolescents are to be stopped from fighting, competency in skills must be acquired and policies within educational infrastructures for resolving conflict must be developed and implemented. Teachers and staff must be aware of and students must learn problem-solving skills and develop avenues for generating socially acceptable alternatives for peaceful resolution. In the following section, gleaned from the literature, twenty characteristics of an effective school setting conflict management response team process are identified and discussed to help teachers model, teach, and reinforce positive conflict resolution.

1. Desire of Involved Parties. To start with, the parties involved must have a desire for an acceptable resolution. Individuals who disagree will need to identify this at the onset and determine that they are willing to stay at the table to talk out a solution that everyone can live with the outcome. DiPaula & Hoy (2001) suggested that the first critical and basic step in managing conflicts effectively is for the parties involved to be willing to come together and give their perspectives. This will determine whether a conflict will be managed constructively or destructively. He observed that constructive strategies are more problem-solving oriented and

focused on integrating interests of both parties so that mutually satisfying outcomes may be achieved. Atici (2007) identified three main strategy categories for resolving conflicts as problem-solving, aggressive, and avoidance strategies. The problem-solving category focuses on finding solutions to the problems without pointing accusing fingers or being hurtful to one another. These strategies require the disputants to first talk to one another so as to develop empathetic and active listening skills in relationship to one another.

When two parties are involved in conflict, tension is usually high between them. This calls for creation of opportunities for each of the parties involved to explain their points in a calm manner without being interrupted. This ensures each party listens to and has a chance to understand the other's concerns. Atici (2007) described problem-solving strategies as those that involve the two disputing parties in focusing on the problem without accusing or being harmful to one another. This strategy facilitates students' developments of skills in empathy, and encourages active listening of the other to heighten understanding of what it feels like to be the other person. The two should believe and accept that for the conflict to be resolved, they must talk to each other. Brinson, Kottler, & Fisher (2004) identified the use of a story to explain situations to students in conflict, as being effective in ensuring that the students process what it is like to be treated differently.

2. Value of input by participants. All parties involved in dispute need to come to the table viewing one another as having equal value and status in the problem solving process. This can be especially important when the individuals involved may come with hierarchical positions related to the school campus or specific classroom (i.e., teacher and principal, student and teacher, parent and teacher, student group with higher status or degree of positive popularity). All individuals involved need to feel that their opinions will be respected regardless of their roles or titles. LaRusso & Sellman (2011) observed that if students are given opportunity to get involved in resolving their own conflicts, especially in the areas that are traditionally reserved for teachers, the students may demonstrate potential in learning and identity development. They will acquire the skills for conflict resolution in a constructive manner, and may be looking forward to be involved in the process. Students who are willing to participate in constructive conflict resolution should be encouraged and given the tools to do so.

3. Defining terms for a common understanding. Clear definitions of terms must be established in order to begin working towards a solution. In one of the curriculum approach models used in conflict resolution, students

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are taught to define their problems, exchange perspectives and figure out how to solve the problem through seeking consensus (Brinson, et al., 2004; Behre, W.J., Astor, R.A., & Meyer, H.A., 2001). All parties involved in the conflict must be able to listen and try to understand one another's viewpoints and opinions. Students involved in conflict must also remember that cooperation is the goal, not competition when it comes to positive conflict resolution. Cooperation is expected to lead to support of each other's goals.

4. Promotion of ethical behavior and respect. Throughout the conflict resolution process, all parties must observe ethical behavior and remain respectful of one another. Brinson, et al. (2004) identified the virtues that are associated with problem-solving such as compassion, forgiveness, self-responsibility and mutual respect that may be emphasized by schools to prevent violence. These virtues may also be promoted by including conflict resolution strategies in the school curriculum. Additionally, ethical standards may be put in place and enforced through a school culture that does not tolerate violence and aggression. There should be measures put in place to decisively handle any occurrences of conflict situations before acts of violence occur.

5. Maintenance of positive and cooperative interactions. This component highlights the priority of positive and cooperative interactions during all discussions and problem-solving exercises. Unfortunately, few teacher preparation programs emphasize to their trainees the importance of collaboration and teaming in work places to ensure peaceful coexistence among students. Lam & Chin (2004) observed that teacher preparation programs do not prepare their candidates for collaborative work so they can be productive team members, who are able to cope with conflicts. It is important for schools to adopt appropriate strategies where members get opportunities to be involved in decision making. Schools might implement programming such as intervention assistance teams, teacher collegial groups, principal advisory council, instructional support teams, and head teacher committees, and use these units in the adoption of a team approach to conflict resolution. The teams may have members with backgrounds from different disciplines (i.e., law, special education, educational psychology, leadership). Each team member may bring in a different approach to solving problems. According to Lam & Chin (2004), such divergent perspectives from team members should be considered complementary rather than exclusive of one another.

6. Remaining calm. Fostering a focused and calm atmosphere will allow all parties to hear and to gather "information" in order to see all perspectives. One should want everyone to hear the message not individuals' anger when they are trying to resolve conflict. Consistency

and promptness by teachers in addressing conflicts among students is a good approach because it makes the students to feel valued and respected. LaRusso and Selman (2011) found that teachers who use this approach also encourage communications, and often listen to each student's point of view. This approach has a ripple effect on the students in that, with time they learn to resolve their own conflicts through embracing communication and listening to peers. They learn to respect and value peers' points of view. Consistency should be observed in all conflict resolution irrespective of the strategy. Daunic, Smith, Robinson, Millar, and Landry (2000) suggest that if students are to be taught conflict resolution as part of the curriculum, they should all receive the same background for the structured mediation process. Likewise the teachers should infuse the lessons into content that provides a logical framework for discussion.

7. Belief, trust, and confidence in the parties and process. The student's teacher, parent, future teacher, or faculty member will need to approach one another in mutual trust and remember to remain student-focused. It is important for administrators to make conscious effort to hone skills that will help them to attend to conflict effectively (DiPaula & Hoy, 2001; Roeser, Eccles & Sameroff, 2000). These authors emphasized the importance of establishing effective working relationships with the school community. This means that administrators must embrace communication and trust of one another as essential elements in using conflict constructively. It is important to have trust in members once they have been charged with responsibilities.

8. Respecting the need for time commitment. Some individuals are reflective thinkers while others enjoy thinking on their feet. Regardless of the response style, it should be remembered that it is important for individuals to commit to a period of time in reflection on the situation during the discussion. Time allowed for that reflection is critical. Additionally, there is need to avoid rushing to judgment and thinking that any one incident or problem might be

resolved in one sitting. Sometimes giving it time allows everyone to come back with different perspectives on the situation. Orpinas, Kelder, Frankowski, Murray, Zhang, and McAlister (2000) observed that time is a crucial factor that can impede the implementation and positive evaluation of a conflict management intervention program. They said that to successfully implement such a program, there is a need to achieve multiple-level changes at the school. That may require a longer time to see the results or impact. It may be important to have bench marks in the implementation process, which will allow time to reflect, review and make changes as needed.

9. Assessment of detachment and attachment in the process. This characteristic reminds the reader that closing eyes and pretending to not be involved doesn't save a drowning person. Remember, if an individual is not a part of the solution, he/she may become the problem! Atici (2007) reported several reasons that students may choose not to seek conflict resolution from their teachers and administrators. Teachers may show detachment from their students' issues in different ways. Some teachers may be unwilling, while others may be incompetent to resolve conflicts. Others may not want to be responsible for making decisions concerning issues that may be at stake. Additionally, some teachers tend to respond to reports of conflict with anger, accusations, injustice, reprimand, or sending the disputants to the discipline committee without taking time to listen carefully to understand perspectives of each party involved in the conflict. Some may allow pre-existing biases that lead to side-taking without all information. Such detached or biased attitudes may lead to students' loss of confidence in their teachers' ability to effectively resolve conflicts.

On a positive note, school administrators may show attachment or commitments to conflict resolution programs by facilitating such programs through provision of necessary

resources and following through with responsible leadership. This shows individual and systemic commitment to assuming involvement in the conflict resolution process, while at the same time, trusting teachers' ability to and the school's investment in working out the solutions. Daunic, et al. (2000) observed that if a designated school team is given responsibility for a program without input, incentive or commitment from leaders, the team morale and interest in the success of the program may diminish. On the other hand, if the team is entrusted with critical decisions, much success may be realized.

10. Clear identification of guiding principles. Important principles should not be sacrificed for the convenience or resolution that is most imminent. Compromise requires that everyone gives a little. If a feeling of being taken advantage of remains, there is a need to rethink so as to determine whether or not too much was given up in order to make peace at any price. DiPaula & Hoy (2001) observed that conflict in itself may be used as a tool for positive change in schools by those who are bold enough to question the status quo. In other words, conflict can be used in the resolution process. School administrators may seek the perceptions of such bold individuals, understand their arguments and use the conflict and tense situations constructively to maintain harmony in the organization. Bolman and Teal (1991) also observed that agreeing on the basics, searching for common interests, experimenting, doubting one's own fallibility and treating differences as group responsibility are important components of conflict management strategies.

11. An established clearly stated bottom line. Define and review, if necessary, the collective answer to the question: what is our ultimate goal? Musti-Rao, Hawkins & Tan (2011) underscored the importance of understanding the nature of a problem by collecting data through observations and interviews about the situations that enable the problem to happen and the

consequences that follow. This information provides baseline ratings of the problem and potential reasons for any persisting interpersonal conflicts and tensions. Having identified and defined the nature of the problem in a classroom, the school team can work together to develop an empirically supported and evidence-based intervention plan based on research, which can be implemented by the classroom teacher. As the intervention plan is being implemented, the team should also collect data to evaluate their level of adherence to the intervention protocol, and the behavioral outcomes of the students. Finally, the effectiveness of the intervention is assessed by analyzing the data related to student behavior and teacher adherence. If an individual or school system incorporates components one to eleven, expected outcomes have been determined, an accepted bottom line decided, and any non-negotiables that may exist in any particular conflictual situation clearly identified.

12. Allow **sufficient time to process and reflect**. Planning time for progression through the problem-solving process is important. It may take more than one meeting to come to consensus. Strategies used in conflict management programs may not be implemented overnight. It takes time for the participants involved to master the process skills. For example, students who are being trained to be peer mediators may need time and opportunity to review the information they have acquired and discuss their mediation experiences. They may need to debrief with fellow team members who can give them feedback on their performances (Daunic, et al., 2000). In addition, individuals learn at different paces. Therefore, a group that is involved in a project cannot be expected to master the skills and be ready to implement and immediately result in all desired systemic improvement.

13. **Identification of assets of each party present**. Integration of this characteristic requires the identification of the assets brought to the table and how each can be used to come to

a win-win solution to the problem at hand. Give and take does not have to mean that one person does all the giving while someone else does all the taking. According to DiPaula and Hoy (2001), administrators who work through conflicts by trying to create a win-win situation are catalysts for positive growth. They create forums wherein the issues causing conflicts might be aired, explained, discussed and worked through to solutions, which have positive outcomes for both the educational setting and the parties in conflict.

14. Assessment and monitoring of pre-existing biases. The point of assessment requires introspection and concerted effort to approach each conflict with an open mind. It is important to understand that “conflicts exist and need to exist” (Hakvoort, 2010), hence they should be handled in a way that leads to positive outcomes that may promote the growth of all individuals involved. In this case, conflicts may be used as learning situations that lead to better understanding and the outcomes of informed, effective decision-making. Maintaining focus on the clearly identified issue and the solution rather than personalities is key. Schwerdtfeger and Menard (2008) suggest using programs that focus on knowledge of basic conflict resolution. This ensures understanding of the nature and dynamics of conflict situations and the appropriate response. The strategy may call for conflict analysis, negotiation, dialog and collaborative problem-solving.

15. Assessment of first impressions: How do they see me? When looking into the mirror, what are the projections what others should see? A person who forms a negative impression of another person in the initial interaction will be less inclined to interact with that person a second time because the first impression has already been used to judge that person in a negative light. Give the impression judgement time. When evaluating an individual or situation for the first time, do not rely on emotions alone. It is better to be remembered as dependable,

trustworthy, and approachable when there is a crisis rather than someone to avoid. Positive first impressions lead to social unity; negative first impressions lead to biases and social prejudice, heightened tensions, and greater potential for interpersonal conflict.

16. Maintaining the relevance of brainstorming. Generating a number of ideas about how resolution might occur in a non-judgmental environment is an important component of the process. This also supports the process of allowing others to be open and honest so all parties may most clearly define the ‘real’ problem. Oftentimes, it takes time to whittle down to the real issues when individuals feel they have to walk on eggshells due to prejudicial settings in which they work or live. DiPaula and Hoy (2001) suggested for school administrators to focus on creating win-win situations in their conflict resolution strategies. They may embrace conflict management techniques that attend to the interests of all parties involved. For example, cultural competence is essential in a school’s efforts to establish harmony. Schools may adopt models that are inclusive of different cultural perspectives by developing diverse, culturally relevant conflict management interventions. This specialized programming would allow students to understand the importance of attention to diversity and how to effectively function in a multicultural setting.

17. Reality-check for each party involved. Each party involved should reflect and clearly state the perceived most realistic accomplishment given the situation and issues being addressed. In Australia, schools have adopted conflict management programs that are based on principles of restorative justice (Saha, 2012). The programs focus on creating behavior change in individuals, while simultaneously keeping school communities safe. The practice is referred to as “Restorative Justice Conferencing”. The practice involves teachers, parents and students, and it aims at providing support to all conflicting parties. In the approach, it is made clear to the

offender in the conflict that a certain behavior is not condoned in the school. However, the approach still remains respectful and supportive to all parties involved (Saha, 2012).

18. Perceptions: Checking to see what others see through the process. While everyone is having a reality check, they may also begin to share and think about the notion that there may be more than one way to reach a common goal leading to a peaceful and positive solution. Orpinas, Kelder, Frankowski, Murray, Zhang, and McAlister (2000) evaluated the effect of peer mediation on reducing aggression among students in eight (8) sampled schools. A cross-section of students was selected based on variables such as gender, grade, race, and economic status. Each school identified teacher mentors who held regular meetings to keep updated with assigned students' activities. The researchers reported that the teachers identified peer mediation as a successful alternative to other measures of reducing aggression (e.g., suspension or behavior intervention strategies). Considering this, it is recommended that more schools use peer mediation as a conflict resolution measure while exploring other options as well.

19. Working together toward mutual acceptance. With patience established as an established rule, all parties work collaboratively toward one mutually, acceptable resolution, which acknowledges the contribution and responsibilities of the individual parties. "Peacemaking skills are acquired through interaction with peers and siblings" (Wall, 2000). When two parties interact, they are assisted in realizing the mutual dependency shared, hence the importance of establishing harmony for both is acknowledged and affirmed. When conflicts arise, the two parties consider the interests that they share. This is the model on which the European communities were founded on after the World War II. The different communities promoted economic ties to ensure a peaceful future by raising the cost of damage to these

relationships. This means that the conflicting parties each recognize the other as a valuable asset that they need in one way or the other (interdependence). Each understands that violation of the agreement comes with a price to pay.

20. **Ongoing maintenance and modeling of what has been learned.** This final characteristic is associated with a sense of self-satisfaction and perceived resolution for all parties, which, in turn, results in more positive solutions. LaRusso and Selman (2011) reported that in resolving student-peer conflict, it is important for teachers to hold regularly scheduled community meetings with students and address issues during class times. It is recommended for the teachers to maintain a sense of collaboration between themselves and students so as to establish a positive community.

Conclusion

This article discussed twenty characteristics of a conflict management response team that may be used in elementary, secondary, and college program development and evaluation. This list provides a checklist guide in programming with the objective of facilitating peaceful solutions to interpersonal conflicts and minimizing the prevalence of verbal and physical aggression. Implementation of the components within the school setting is purported to increase positive outcomes and provide instruction to students in effective problem-solving.

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